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Mercenaries in Libya: Gadhafi's hired terrorists

By Edward M. Gabriel

Two weeks have passed since U.S. military forces tracked down Osama bin Laden and finally brought him to justice, a decade after 9/11.

But while bin Laden is dead, the hate and violence he preached clearly isn't. The deadly bombing in Morocco — which killed 17 and has been linked to an al Qaeda loyalist — is the most recent evidence of this.

In Libya, terrorism has a different, yet disturbing face, where hired mercenaries are terrorizing the Libyan opposition. Senior NATO officials have received information that Moammar Gadhafi is spending millions to hire mercenaries from the Polisario Front in Algeria and elsewhere to help fight the U.N.-backed coalition and quash Libyans who oppose his dictatorial regime. Credible sources report that hundreds of Polisario mercenaries are being paid \$10,000 each by Gadhafi to cross Algeria into Libya to fight NATO-led forces and kill Libyan protesters and rebels.

In other words, the Polisario Front, which touts itself as a human rights champion and gets millions in humanitarian aid from the U.S. and Europe through the United Nations, is letting its members take up arms against U.S.-allied NATO forces, in defiance of the U.N. Security Council mandate, and join Gadhafi's military campaign against the people of Libya.

As a former U.S. Ambassador to Morocco and someone who has followed the Middle East and North Africa closely for more than three decades, I find it outrageous that the Polisario Front continues to enjoy a civil reception in the official corridors of the U.S. administration and Congress, even while many of its members are engaged in a deadly shooting war against NATO forces in Libya.

And Algeria, which was one of only two Arab League nations to vote against a U.N. no-fly zone in Libya, is duplicitous in opposing U.N.-sanctioned military action against Libya while providing materiel to support Gadhafi's forces. After capturing 15 Algerian mercenaries last month, Libyan rebel leaders charged Algeria with backing Gadhafi and "turning a blind eye" to mercenaries crossing into Libya. More recently, Libyan opposition leader Mustafa Abdel Jalil — who met with senior Obama administration officials in the White House Friday — charged that Algerian planes have been used to fly mercenaries to fight Libyan

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rebels. And the Africa News Agency in London now reports that 500 combat-equipped light trucks have been sent to Libya from Algeria.

If the details about mercenaries received by NATO officials are accurate, both the leadership of the Polisario and Algerian authorities stand complicit in Gadhafi's efforts to reinforce his mercenary army. It is inconceivable that hundreds of Polisario mercenaries could be hired in the first place, or travel more than 1,000 miles from the isolated, Polisario-run camps in southwestern Algeria, without the tacit, if not explicit, support of Polisario and Algerian leaders.

Recent reports from press and policy experts have linked Polisario members to al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Latin American drug cartels, and other criminal groups operating in the Sahel region in Africa. Terrorist bands in these lawless expanses have kidnapped and killed foreign nationals, and engaged in illegal trafficking of drugs, arms, people and humanitarian relief supplies.

This is unacceptable. These charges of mercenary and criminal activity in Libya must be fully examined and investigated, and the U.S. government must hold the Polisario Front and Algeria accountable for their actions and complicity. Rather than welcome them into the halls of Congress and the U.S. administration, and let them exploit our generous aid dollars, those who dare to take up arms against the U.S. and its NATO allies should face very serious consequences.

Edward M. Gabriel served as US Ambassador to Morocco from 1997 to 2001, and currently advises the government of Morocco.

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